

TOEIC In Transition: An account of The Center for English Language Education's transition to a TOEIC based curriculum for the Freshman English International Relations Students

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Education, and perhaps above all, higher education is, whether we want to admit it or not, a service industry. It is the marketplace for the marketplace of ideas. In times as competitive as these universities feel the continuing pressure of providing their students with the best opportunity to make themselves into attractive candidates for whatever lives and careers they choose after graduation. In Japan, the TOEIC score is a growing part of that process. Academics are often at war over the ability of standardized tests to accurately and comprehensively measure the subjects of their design. For many, the TOEIC test is no exception, however, in spite of those arguments, there is no denying the cultural and professional significance the test has taken on in Japan. With most universities requiring specified TOEIC scores as a graduation requirement, and many employers using the score as an indication of an applicant's English level, the TOEIC has become a phenomenon that has almost transcended the subject itself.

To that end the International Relations department at Asia University has endeavored to make TOEIC a central part of the English curriculum for IR majors, beginning with a re-vamped Freshman English policy, enacted in the spring of 2009. The process of changing the curriculum was begun in earnest in the fall of 2008 with a series of extended meetings and discussions by the Asian University English Education Committee about materials to be used and the minimum amount of time that would be required of each professor to teach TOEIC to their IR Freshman English students. What follows is an account of that process and the decisions that followed.

Fall 2008: English Education Committee Meets to Discuss and Agree Upon a Framework for TOEIC Integration

I: Textbooks

Prior to the decision to integrate TOEIC into the Freshman English International Relations Curriculum, Visiting Faculty Members were teaching IR students from a

variety of integrated four skills textbook. As a way of cementing the shifting focus of the curriculum it was decided that for our IR students we would change to a TOEIC based textbook. TOEIC textbooks have become a cottage industry in Japan. The amount of materials available made the choice of texts daunting. Two distinct textbook styles seemed to dominate the choices overall: Texts that were straight forward test practice, essentially just a series of questions and section drills or re-printings of old TOEIC tests with tactics offered in the margins or at the end of the sections. The other texts were divided into thematic chapters, with example test questions arranged around the idea of the given chapter. It was clear that as we transitioned away from an integrated four skills textbook, the thematic TOEIC texts seemed to offer the best opportunity for the professors to supplement materials around the themes and continue to provide students with both communicative and writing exercises outside of the time in class devoted to teaching reading and listening, the two main skills tested by the TOEIC.

A number of problems were evident when looking through all of the materials available, the most pressing being that some of the most respected books, like the *Oxford Tactics For The TOEIC*, were written for students of English ability that was well beyond the level of our first year students. The average score for our first year students was still relatively low, and teaching out of more difficult textbooks, it was decided, would only complicate matters further, because the amount of explanation required to understand the material in the books, vocabulary, grammar, etc, would slow the process down and discourage the students from learning. This led us to exclude a number of texts that appeared written significantly above the lexical ability of our first year students. We also excluded books that were, except for the test questions, written solely in Japanese, even though we conceded that at our lowest levels some Japanese in the texts might be useful for the students understanding of the materials.

The issue that needed the most consideration was how to choose textbooks appropriate for students of such varying levels. Using the TOEIC scores of the previous freshman class as a guideline, we created textbook groups based on a range of scores across a range FE levels. We chose textbooks with published target scores as a way of deciding which books would be level appropriate for our students. Having never used any of these materials before, there was a certain degree of apprehension, but it was

decided essentially that 2009 would be a pilot year and the more materials we chose, the more informed our decisions could be later on, after everyone had a semester teaching in this new format. In addition to the four primary textbooks chosen, certain additional resources and textbooks were also ordered to provide professors with an abundance of materials.

Primary Textbooks	FE IR LEVEL
Successful Keys to The TOEIC 700 (<i>Pearson Longman</i> , Mizumoto & Stafford, 2007)	FE IR 1
Successful Keys to the TOEIC 600 (<i>Pearson Longman</i> , Mizumoto & Stafford, 2007)	FE IR 2-5
Successful Keys to the TOEIC 500, (<i>Pearson Longman</i> , Mizumoto & Stafford, 2007)	FE IR 6-9
TOEIC Test Target Trainer 350, (<i>Thomson</i> , Tanabe, Yumoto, Tozer, & Pfifer, 2007)	FE IR 10-12

II: Teaching Time

After choosing textbooks, discussions were held concerning how much class time would be devoted to teaching TOEIC. For our other majors, Business, Law, and Economics, Freshman English is often thought of as a marathon, taught over the course of an entire year. The unique part of the FE IR class has always been that the majority of students study in America during their second semester, which changes the nature of how they study and how they are taught. In this environment we often found the majority of FE IR students highly motivated to study because they saw the practical benefits of improving their English prior to leaving for America. Before the shift to a TOEIC based curriculum, many professors who taught FE IR spent a significant amount of time on communicative exercises that helped prepare the students for their time in America. There was some fear once the shift to TOEIC was announced that teachers would not be able to dedicate as much time to giving students the practical language they needed most when they went to the U.S. Though there is no question that the students know the value of the TOEIC, there was also some fear that putting the students through TOEIC practice

or teaching TOEIC related topics four days a week in Freshman English could have a negative impact on the learning process and serve to de-motivate the students. As a way to give the department flexibility to continue teaching a variety of language skills, not just those most beneficial to improving their TOEIC score, it was decided by the International Relations department, in conjunction with the English Education Committee, that 50% of class time would be devoted to teaching TOEIC and the other 50% could be used anyway the professors thought best for improving the students language skills. Perhaps, above all the decisions made in the process, this was the most important. This decision was crucial to preserving the department's ability to teach a more well rounded curriculum and still offer students a chance to improve their speaking and writing along side their reading and listening, the cornerstone skills of the TOEIC test.

2009 Class Arrives

I: TOEIC and the OPI's

Transitioning to a TOEIC curriculum was only one of several wholesale changes begun in the spring of 2009. In the past all of the incoming freshman were given the Freshman English Placement Test in the weeks immediately prior to beginning the spring semester. Based on their scores the students were leveled by the CELE Assessment Committee, and then were scheduled for Oral Placement Interviews to be conducted by their respective Freshman English teachers. The OPI's were used to assess the students communicative abilities and to identify outliers whose speaking ability was either far outside the range of the rest of the class, or far below. In those cases students were either moved up or moved down based on the OPI assessment. For outliers, the predominant philosophy was that a student's communicative ability was given more weight as a leveling tool. As a leveling instrument, the FEPT had often proven reliable in testing students' reading and listening skills in concert with the speaking component of the OPI. After it had been decided that the IR students would begin a TOEIC based curriculum, it was also decided that they would no longer be given the FEPT, but rather be given a

TOEIC test and then leveled based on scores. Looking over the TOEIC scores of past freshman IR classes, we noticed in many classes, especially at the higher levels, that TOEIC scores could have a wide range in a class even if FEPT scores were closer together. In the FE IR 1 class from 2008, the TOEIC scores ranged from 380-600, but their ACTFL communicative skills were deemed Intermediate High and up. Because textbooks had been chosen with target test scores in mind, it was decided that the most weight would be given to the TOEIC score and that even if outliers were identified during the OPI process, their movement up or down would be somewhat limited. There was some uneasiness about this at first. For those of us who had taught TOEIC in the past, we had all encountered the student with a high TOEIC score, but very little communicative ability. Since the classes were not simply test practice classes, but more dynamic in their design, the importance of students being able to communicate at near level ability was all the more important.

For the most part, we made very conservative decisions during the OPI process and kept most students with their original classes, only eventually moving a few students whose communicative ability suggested their test score were either anomalies or poor indicators of their English ability. Obviously not everyone tests well. In the end we moved roughly thirteen students out of more than 300.

II: Teaching in Action

In the spring of 2009 we began our pilot semester of teaching TOEIC in our FE IR classes. One thing that seemed to aide the process was the number of new teachers who had joined the faculty that year. More than half of the CELE professors teaching Freshman English IR were new and did not have either the benefit nor the bother of unlearning past teaching habits with the IR class. To them, there was no such thing as new or old, it just was, and new eyes bring new perspectives, which can especially be helpful in a time of change.

Between the lines all the professors teaching strategy naturally differed somewhat. In some classes textbook pages that focused on reading were assigned as homework and class time was devoted to listening exercises; in others, vocabulary and

grammar were highlighted. Some teachers at higher levels found success teaching tactics such as learning to identify wrong answers and skimming for information. Decisions were made based on the needs of the particular students in the room, and perhaps a month in everyone learned better which test sections required the most attention.

One philosophy that governed our teaching was giving students maximum exposure to actual test questions and test environments. For many of our students, although they knew of the test, it was the first time they had ever sat for it. TOEIC, like so many other standardized tests, is made up of its own a particular language and testing patterns. The more the students learned the organization and flow of the test, the more they were given practice tests in class, the more easily they were able to identify sections of strength and weakness. This test familiarity appears central to early gains and also provided the students with a degree of comfort that comes from knowing what to expect from the test.

Perhaps some of the biggest missteps we made were in our textbook decisions from the previous fall. Not having taught TOEIC in this format before, we were overly concerned about trying to find textbooks with published target scores that could more easily level the students into textbook groups. On the face of it, this seemed like a sound idea, but proved problematic because the score information we had used to choose the textbook levels differed somewhat from the FE IR 2009's test results, which overall were a bit lower than the previous class. Especially at the middle to higher levels the published target score on the textbook was well beyond most of the student's lexical ability. This translated to the language and vocabulary used in the book being far too difficult for the students to understand, which on one hand can be challenging, but can also be discouraging to students who constantly get questions wrong. As we move forward and make choices for next year and beyond discussion has already begun about a complete overhaul of our textbook choices. Also in discussion about teaching methods to employ for the coming year, it was agreed that CELE would try and develop tactic materials that could be used at any level.

Conclusions

As with all major curriculum shifts it continues to be a learning process. More classroom hours and more conversation are needed to help sharpen our teaching methods. In transitioning to a TOEIC based English curriculum, the goal of International Relations department was clear, not only to acknowledge the importance of the TOEIC in Japan, but also to provide the students with the framework to significantly improve their scores before graduation. Though the students met the TOEIC tasks at times with a level of frustration, there is no denying they understood the serious role their scores could have in their future employment. Early indications suggest that the change to TOEIC has helped to improve the students' scores, but a more in depth examination of the results after the students return from America is needed before any conclusions can be made. In all things, learning gets steeper at the top, and students always find that as their scores increase, it is harder to make the same large leaps each time they take the test. Certainly the importance individual students place on achieving their TOEIC score goals is the single greatest factor determining whether or not the student's score continues to make significant increases. As we move forward we will continue to gather information to help us think more deeply about the delicate problem of marrying what our students need to improve their TOEIC scores with what they need to improve their overall language ability